

Future Perfect: Chao Lingshen's Tale

by Project Arashi

Category: Halo, Negima! Magister Negi

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Summary: To decide to alter the past is a serious consideration. What could possibly motivate a young girl to travel back in time to change all that she knows? Kuro Arashi twoshot sidestory.

1. Falling Wings

_October 20, 2552

> _Hangar Bay A-01, Orbital Defense Platform ODA-144 _Athens_,
Low Earth Orbit

> _0144 hours, Greenwich Mean Time_

"Malta_, what is your status?"_

Holding up a slender hand to signal her entourage of UNSC Marines to stop, the teenaged girl of probable-Chinese origin looked out through the transparisteel viewport, staring across the hundreds of miles of open space to the _Malta_, the nearest Super-MAC station to the station that she was aboard. Even across the great distance, her sharp eyesight could pick out the shapes of Covenant boarding craft detaching from and veering away from the station.

Almost as if they were running from something, she mused, tilting her head to one side and cupping her chin in her hand.

"_I don't believe it, they're retreating! We've won!"_

A brilliant flash lit up from the Fire Control Center of the _Malta_. The entire station began to vibrate, followed a moment later by beginning to literally come apart at the seams. Molten fire erupted out of the new openings in the station's hull, softening and warping its angular lines and hard edges. There was another, even brighter, flash that could not have been anything but the ammunition storage, and then the once-graceful _Malta_ shattered into three large pieces that began to drift in opposite directions.

"Holy shit!" one of the Marines exclaimed.

Seconds later, the Athens trembled slightly from the shockwave as the sound of a muffled blast reached the group through the heavily-reinforced bay windows.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," another Marine muttered.

"None of 'em are gonna come save your ass, Asakura, so stow the bitching."

Private Satoshi Asakura muttered a curse under his breath, then shifted his grip on his BR55 battle rifle. "Hoo-ah, Sarge," he said. Asakura was almost a child still, just three months out of boot camp, only a year out of high school. Even so, his curious nature had been shaved out of him by three months of war against the Covenant the way his head full of red hair had been shaved off at boot.

The Master Gunnery Sergeant, one Dave Akashi, turned to her. "Miss Lingshen, we need to get you off this station before the Covenant make us into a repeat performance of their big show on the Malta."

Chao Lingshen nodded, a grave expression on her otherwise-cheerfully youthful face. "I could not agree with you more, Sergeant Akashi," she said quietly. "How do you propose we make our escape?"

"Lifeboat deck would be the safest bet, Sarge," offered a soft-spoken Marine, his face somehow managing to be mostly-concealed by the standard-issue helmet he wore.

"Yeah, but there's no telling how long we got until the Covvies cook us off like they did to the Malta, Captain Miyazaki," another Marine replied. This young man was all but bouncing from foot to foot, looking in all directions as though genetically incapable of standing still.

"Then what's your brilliant suggestion, Narutaki?" Akashi demanded.

There was silence as Corporal Kano Narutaki suddenly became very interested in the mechanism of his M90 combat shotgun.

"Pelicans," Asakura said after a moment, pounding his fist against the side of his battle rifle. "We can get out on a Pelican and run straight to Earth!"

"There's EVA gear we may need in case we lose cabin pressure," Akira Miyazaki said, pausing to check his Office of Naval Intelligence-issue silenced M7 submachine gun. "They're in the lockers along the back wall of the hangar."

"Right, you heard the captain," Akashi said. "Narutaki, Saotome, go get enough EVA gear for all of us. Hasegawa, get in that Pelican and get it going. The rest of you, keep this hangar secure."

With a staccato of affirmative responses, the various Marine and UNSC personnel spread out throughout the room, with Narutaki and Corporal Satoshi Saotome, the fire team's expert in Covenant linguistics,

crossing toward the rear of the hangar in a crouch, their weapons up and scanning their surroundings for any Covenant ambushes. Sergeant Masaru Hasegawa, the techie of the group, climbed into the open cockpit of the Pelican dropship and began running the large craft through a preflight checklist. Lance Corporal Anton Ayase and Private Takumi Yukihiro turned to cover the large hangar doors they'd come through, while Private Johannes Kugimia joined up with Private Asakura to cover the doors opposite the hangar. Gunnery Sergeant Akashi stood near the back troop bay of the Pelican, while Captain Miyazaki moved to stand beside Chao, who was standing before the large transparisteel bay doors.

"Not a pretty sight," Miyazaki said, referring to the countless numbers of Covenant transports and attack craft swooping and diving through space around them.

"No, it's not," Chao said quietly, her voice haunted. In her mind's eye, she could already see the plasma beams from the Covenant capital ships burning fiery swaths across the planet's surface, reducing the once-proud homeworld of humanity to nothing but a blackened cinder. "I wonder, sometimes, could magic have caused this war to run any different?"

"Doubtful," Miyazaki replied, a little sadly. "In this day and age, technology is far too entrenched. The sudden revelation of magic would provoke a civil war. Not something we need while we're fighting for our very survival against the Covenant."

"And now, there are barely any surviving mages left anyway," Chao said bitterly.

"All we can do, is hope that technology and humanity's spirit will keep us alive," Miyazaki said, reaching into a pocket and producing a timeworn tarot-like card that bore the likeness of a young girl with shoulder-length blue hair, wearing a white robe, surrounded by open books. "It's... all we have."

From the back of the hangar, there was a muffled blast, then the instantly-recognizable sound of plasma fire. All attention snapped back to the rear entrance to the hangar, where the previously-locked door had been blown in, and a Covenant assault force was streaming into the hangar. Narutaki had been knocked off his feet by the blast, and was crawling in the direction of his dropped shotgun, blood streaming from his ears, his eardrums having been shattered by the blast's concussion wave. A Covenant grunt looked over, noticed the crawling Marine, took careful aim, and fired a single bolt from his plasma pistol into Narutaki's exposed neck, killing him instantly.

"Covenant!" Ayase shouted, snapping up his battle rifle and firing three-round bursts toward the invaders as he moved toward a cargo container to take cover.

Saotome, who had already been inside one of the lockers when the aliens had broken in, was protected from the blast wave by the open door, and quickly hunkered down behind the door, firing his battle rifle blindly at the intruders. His unaimed fire managed to kill two grunts and send another scampering away with a 9.5mm round embedded in its methane tank.

Kugimia and Asakura swept up from the right side of the Pelican, utilizing a steady stream of battle rifle and submachine gun fire, interspersed with occasional grenades, to try and keep the Covenant soldiers away from their besieged comrade. "Saotome, get clear!" Kugimia shouted, ducking behind the Pelican's landing gear to empty and replenish his depleted submachine gun.

Before the Marine could move, however, a blue-armored Covenant Elite strode into the room, looked toward the opened locker door, and saw the booted feet that clearly belonged to a human taking shelter behind the flimsy metal obstacle. Taking its plasma rifle into its left hand, the Elite produced a weapon handle and activated his plasma sword with the flick of a wrist. No sooner had it done so, the shouting of the humans in the room increased drastically, to the sounds of "Get out of there!" or "Run, Saotome!"

Whatever the humans were saying to their comrade, for this Elite did not understand English, it would give the cowering human no time to act. Drawing back its plasma sword, and using its plasma rifle to push a grunt out of the way, the Elite drove the superheated blade through the metal door, up to the hilt.

On the other side of the door, Saotome felt extreme heat explode in his chest, and looked down to see the twin prongs of the plasma sword protruding through him. Weakly, he clutched at the energy blade as though to remove it from his body, burning the flesh from his hands in the process, and then his head fell back against the door as the rest of him slumped against it.

Swearing violently, Akashi produced twin M6D pistols and opened fire on the invading Covenant, killing grunts by the handful as the powerful Magnum sent devastating 12.7mm rounds through skulls, torsos, and methane tanks, all with equally-pleasing effects. Flowing into a state of battle rage, Akashi broke from cover, rushing the blue-armored Elite as his last pair of shots drew sparks from the alien's energy shields. The sergeant rolled into a forward flip as plasma fire shot past him, scooping up a plasma grenade from the corpse of a grunt and activating it as his arc carried him forward to land with both feet on the Elite's shoulders. He slammed the plasma grenade onto the Elite's helmet, then kicked off and propelled himself backwards through the air.

Nearby, a grunt reared back, a glowing ball of blue light held in its hand, and hurled the implement, hissing like an angry snake, toward the side of the Pelican that Kugimia and Asakura were taking shelter behind. Spotting the incoming plasma grenade, Asakura shouted, "Look out, grenade!" and dove out toward a cargo crate. Halfway to the crate, Asakura felt pain blossom from multiple points in his torso, and looked down to see at least a dozen glowing pink Needler shards embedded in his chest and midsection. He managed to get out "Oh, fu-" before vanishing in a pink mist.

At the same instant, the plasma grenade exploded, the heat and blast wave sending Kugimia sprawling to the hangar floor, dead, and his submachine gun flipping up into the air. Akashi, still in the air, caught the weapon in midflight and unloaded the rest of the clip into the Elite that had killed Saotome, staggering the alien long enough for Akashi to get clear of the grenade's blast radius. Seconds later, the grenade went off, killing the stuck Elite instantly, the blast washing over a pair of grunts nearby.

Hitting the ground, Akashi tucked into a roll and came to a stop resting against what he thought was the Pelican's landing gear. Then the object he was leaning against shifted, and he looked back to find a red-armored Elite towering over him, its plasma rifle reared up over its head.

Chao and Miyazaki watched in horror as the blow from the Elite shattered Akashi's spine, sending the master gunnery sergeant slumping to the floor, his body twitching occasionally from the permanent paralysis, and likely slow death, he'd been subjected to at the hands of the Elite. The Elite turned toward the crates that Ayase and Yukihiro were taking cover behind, firing its plasma rifle at them to keep them pinned, even as it jumped up into the troop bay of the Pelican. Shouting in the Elite's native language could be heard over the melee.

"Hasegawa, get out of there!" Miyazaki shouted over the comlink as he rolled a fragmentation grenade under the Pelican, toward a group of Covenant that had taken shelter near the bodies of Kugimia and Asakura. "That red Elite's coming for you!"

"_Don't worry, I've almost got the-_"

"Hasegawa? Hasegawa!"

Fearing what she would see, Chao looked up toward the Pelican's cockpit. The young Marine technician was nowhere to be seen, but she felt a shiver run up her spine as she watched red blood suddenly spray up against the inside of the dropship's canopy. Reaching into her left pocket, she brushed her hand against the M6D that Miyazaki had given her when the Marines had arrived to spirit her away to safety, and feared that she wouldn't live to see the end of the day.

"Ayase, Yukihiro, get over here, we have to fall back!" Miyazaki shouted, then began firing suppressive fire at the Covenant troops to buy the last two surviving Marines time to regroup with them.

As the two stood to move, a plasma sword suddenly flashed into existence, then drove itself through Yukihiro, the stealthed Elite wielding it using the weapon to lift the Marine bodily and inspect the dying human. Snarling, the alien tossed Yukihiro away, then lunged forward and laid Ayase's back open with a swipe of the glowing blade.

Firmly planting his feet, Miyazaki turned and unloaded his entire magazine into the advancing Elite, the sheer volume of shots overloading its active camouflage and shields, bringing them both down. Before Miyazaki could reload or switch weapons, however, the Elite reached him and drove the plasma sword completely through him.

Grunting in pain, Miyazaki reached down with trembling hands, holding his open right hand toward a fragmentation grenade that had fallen from Ayase's body and rolled to his feet. The Elite looked down at the grenade, barked out a laugh, and then leaned its face in close to Miyazaki's and said in halting English, "That grenade will not save you, human."

Despite the pain, Miyazaki grinned and whispered, "_Flans ex armatio_."

A sudden gust of wind swirled through the hangar, picking up the grenade from the ground and pushing it right into Miyazaki's outstretched hand. Flicking out the pin with his thumb, Miyazaki drew back his right arm, then shoved the grenade forward into the Elite's mouth. "See you...in Hell, squid-lips..."

The fragmentation grenade exploded, blowing the Elite's head completely off and peppering Miyazaki's body with shrapnel. As the two corpses slumped to the ground, Chao found herself riveted to the spot, staring in horror at the death that surrounded her. It was just more proof to her: without magic, humanity would not survive the Covenant.

With that thought firmly rooted in her head, Chao turned to flee from the hangar, to find some other method of escaping the _Athens_. But she had only managed to get three steps when she felt plasma fire scorch her legs, sending her slamming to the metal deck. Rolling onto her back, she looked up to see the red-armored Elite standing over her, the disengaged hilt of a plasma sword in its right hand.

The alien reached down with its left hand, seizing her by the throat and lifting her into the air. It flicked its right wrist, activating the plasma sword and holding it in preparation to finish her. "I can smell your fear, human," it told her. "Do you fear death?"

"That seems to be a pretty irrelevant question right now," Chao answered. "What about you? Do _you_ fear death?"

The alien barked a laugh. "What possible threat could you pose to me, human? You are within a breath of meeting the Forerunners."

Chao suddenly pulled both hands from her pockets. In her left, she held the M6D pistol, and in her right, she held an oddly-designed pocket watch. Calmly, she placed the barrel of the M6D against the small part of the Elite's head that its helmet didn't cover, and pulled the trigger. The pistol's chamber ejected a single shell casing as the Elite's head rocked back, the alien's grip on her throat falling away.

As she saw the rest of the Covenant forces in the room begin to fire a volley of plasma bolts at her that she had no hope of surviving, she pressed her thumb down on the topmost of the buttons arranged along the watch's side. _Cassiopeia, be good to me,_ was Chao's last thought as she felt the very fabric of time and space warp and twist around her.

2. Past Perfect

_Date Unknown

> _Location Unknown

> _Time Unknown_

When a conscious awareness of her surroundings returned to Chao, she initially believed herself to be dead. One could _generously_ describe time travel as an imprecise science, if one could even describe it as a science at all. In all her experimentations with

time travel, the longest jump being seven hours away from her starting point, she had concluded that, generally, one returned to the normal flow of time in the exact location in which they had left it. And for her, that presented the distinct problem that she would be returning to where the hangar bay of the Athens was. Or had been. Or would have been.

Temporal mechanics made even her head hurt.

She knew she had neglected to input a destination time, so she had no way of even knowing if she was in the past or the future. Or if she had managed to completely destroy the timestream and was doomed to floating in a neverending abyss. If she had gone into the past, prior to the construction of the Athens, then she should have come back in empty space, only to suffer the joys of explosive decompression. Or flash-boiling, or instant freezing, depending on whether she was in direct sunlight or shadowed by a celestial mass. For a brief moment, she wondered whether one would suffer decompression or temperature shock first, but quickly wiped that morbid thought from her head. She had no knowledge, and no desire to learn first-hand.

Alternatively, if she had skipped ahead past the destruction of the Athens, for she held no illusion that the entire Malta/Athens/Cairo battle cluster would be spared the fate of the Malta, then she still had the issue of hard vacuum to contend with.

When she opened her eyes, she then believed that she'd taken a stray plasma bolt to the face that she'd failed to notice that had blinded her. She found herself lying flat on her back on an endless white plain, with no discernible difference between any existing walls, ceiling, or floor.

No, not entirely on her back. She could sense the distinct sensation of floating in some sort of liquid medium that was likewise as white and invisible as her surrounding environment. The clinical portion of her mind noted the numerous consistencies shared between floating in water and floating in zero gravity. She could tell, at the very least, that she was floating on her back in the liquid, rather than fully immersed in it, first and foremost by her continued ability to breathe. Second to this was the noticeable difference in moisture saturation between her front and her back.

Before she could contemplate what she should be doing, or how to determine where, or more accurately, when, she was, her motion tracker detected movement. Like the other civilians filling highly-important jobs within the UNSC, she carried a portable motion tracker connected to a microcomputer built into her clothing. When the tracker detected movement, the computer caused a row of vibrating discs sewn into the fiberweave to vibrate in the direction the movement was coming from. When programmed to ignore motion connected to friendly IFF codes, the system she used was a handy workaround to the fact that soldiers could not generally equip a motion tracker without having a helmet HUD for a radar display to appear on.

Her right hand, slowed by the drag of the liquid she was floating in, reached for the M6D pistol as her head came up to look in the direction of the motion. As her fingers closed over the cool metal of the weapon, she looked about frantically, unable to locate the source

of her contact.

The touch was at first so gentle she couldn't be sure that she wasn't imagining it, but she soon came to fully sense the clinical touch probing the plasma burns on the backs of her legs. Plasma injuries to human skin were atrocious, painful things, but as she felt the fingers turning and rubbing the charred skin, she felt not one iota of pain.

"Severe third-degree burns on both legs, deep enough to cause nerve and musculature damage," an elderly voice spoke to her from everywhere and nowhere at once, both surrounding her and speaking inside her own head. "These burns appear to have been caused by temperatures in excess of several thousand degrees, but there's no indication of any burns or damage outside of the localized area. No doubt, that if you were forced to rely upon the standard medical procedures of the day, you would never walk again. Fortunately for you, the healing properties of the Lifestream will have you fully healed in no time."

Wetting her lips with her tongue, she quietly inquired, "Nainai?"

As far as she could see, there was still no one anywhere in her immediate area and yet, when the voice answered her, she knew that its owner was smiling in amusement. "Many children know me as grandmother, but you are not amongst their number. Fear not, child of the future, for you are safe here. Yes, I know that you do not belong in this time. Fate smiles upon you."

"The Covenant..."

"Are on the other side of the galaxy and still fighting amongst themselves, as far as we know or care," the voice informed her. Sensing Chao's confusion, it continued, "The Lifestream in which you are immersed has granted I, the Yochi no Kouken, the ability to view and witness the strongest emotional moments in your life. I have seen the wonders and horrors that await humanity close to six hundred years into the future.

Chao abruptly sat upright, surprising herself to find that she could actually 'sit' as though this 'Lifestream' were a solid surface. "Six hundred years!?"

"Calm yourself, child. You are in the year 1997. Fate intended you to be brought to this general era, but even Fate cannot accurately place such a tremendous jump in time. Your talents and efforts are not needed for many more years, for those whom you will both fight against and fight alongside have not yet awakened to their own destiny. A great destiny awaits you, your stop here being merely a pebble in the pond, setting great events in motion."

As the voice spoke, Chao felt the familiar weight of Casseiopeia being lifted from her person, and watched the magical time machine float in the air before her, spinning slowly on its chain.

"This wondrous device will play many crucial roles where you must go. Some of these will be caused by your own hand, others will not. Trust your heart to know when and where your destiny will guide your hand. Farewell, Chao Lingshen. Remember always, that you possess the heart of a Hero."

_October 20, 2005

> _Class 1-A, Mahora Academy for Girls

> _0725 hours, local time_

Takahata Takamichi cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the twenty-eight girls in his class and quieting the usual early-morning rabble. One by one, each student turned her attention to their teacher, and the girl they did not know, wearing a Mahora uniform, who stood beside him. Their curiosity was soon sated as the chain-smoking teacher lifted his left hand toward the Chinese girl.

"Girls, this young lady will be joining this class as of today. Her name is Chao Lingshen, and I hope you will all make her feel welcome in 1-A."

Chao bowed at the waist toward the class, then smiled broadly and said, "It is an honor to attend classes with all of you. I wish that we can all become friends and graduate together."

She had been back in the 'normal' timestream for two years. Upon being sent forward by that mysterious voice, she had found herself a guest of an island nation she had learned was called MolMol. And to her surprise, the plasma burns had been almost fully healed when she arrived on the island. The small amount of physical therapy that was all that remained had been provided to her, free of charge, by the MolMolian authorities.

In return for their kindness, she had given them the design schematics, which she had memorized, for several weapons and vehicles in use by the UNSC; namely the Warthog light reconnaissance vehicle, the BR55HB battle rifle, and the MA5C assault rifle, to name a few. She knew that it went against all intelligent rules of the space-time continuum to deliver future technology into the hands of the people in the past, but she didn't care. If humans had access to the UNSC's technology now, then in six hundred years they should have something a lot better to fight off the Covenant.

"Chao-san, you will be in seat 19," Takahata was saying. "As for the rest of you girls, why don't you introduce yourselves to help make Chao-san feel more welcome."

At the front right of the class, a girl with red hair pulled into a spiked bun behind her head stood up and waved to Chao, grinning amiably. "Number Three, Asakura Kazumi."

Cold, spikey adrenaline shot through the time traveling girl as the redhead gave her name. Hell of a coincidence. This...Private Asakura, this girl is his ancestor?

She closed her eyes, and suddenly she was back in the hangar bay of the Athens, watching the needless death of the Marines playing out again. Only this time she could see perfectly over Private Asakura's shoulder...

Witnessing him advance in a crouch toward the breached doors, plasma fire streaking over his head and spattering against cargo crates and

the Pelican's landing gear._

The Marine went to a knee behind a cargo crate tall enough to afford that super-soldier, Spartan-117, full cover even when standing upright, and chucked a grenade around the corner. A knot of grunts were blown into the sky by the explosion, and Asakura stared down the thermal-imaging scope of his battle rifle to see through the smoke and pour three-round bursts into the head of a fully-shielded Elite, forcing the alien to duck back through the doorway.

At the exact moment that he stooped back to swap magazines, a live plasma grenade sailed through the air to land directly equidistant between himself and Private Kugimia. The blue orb clicked as it made contact with the ground, then began to hiss ominously.

"_Look out, grenade!" he cried, then jumped to his feet and leapt out and away from the grenade._

In perfect clarity, Chao watched as the Elite that Asakura had been bombarding stepped back into the room, clutching twin needlers it had appropriated from two of the fragged grunts. The blue-armored alien narrowed its eyes at the human's dodging form, and leveled the needlers, holding its fingers down on the trigger to empty both weapons at the human.

Pink crystalline shards embedded themselves into the marine, driving their full length into the ceramic body armor and into the soft tissue beneath. His eyes going wide in terror and sudden realization, Asakura muttered, "Oh fu-" before the needles exploded, shredding the marine in a pink mist.

By the time the flashback ended, a number of other girls had already introduced themselves. Chao was sure that the usefully-automatic portions of her mind had logged their names, but reliving that experience, even though it had been two years ago, to her mind, was captivating her full attention.

Just getting up was a girl with some of her shoulder-length black hair pulled into a short ponytail on the right side of her head. She smiled at Chao and introduced herself, "Yuuna Akashi, student number two."

Chao had known Master Gunnery Sergeant Akashi before the war with the Covenant. Hard as nails when in uniform, the man was a playful, fun-loving sport shooter. Looking upon the woman from whom Akashi was descended, she could see where he got it from. She closed her eyes, letting her past, this world's future, come back to her.

Sergeant Akashi, brandishing twin M6D pistols, stepped out from behind cover, and time itself seemed to dilate to Chao's over-the-shoulder perceptions. Overcome with morbid curiosity, she watched the brilliant flash from each pistol's muzzle, the bullets projecting out and leaving a stream of air displacement behind them.

_Across the bay, she watched his precision fire blow through the skulls of seven grunts, before the gunnery sergeant shifted his fire to the blue-armored Elite wielding an energy sword. Akashi stepped out fully and rushed forward, events still occurring in 'bullet time,' to use the phrase from the old 20__th__ century 'Matrix'

movies. Green and blue plasma fire streaked past on all sides, coming close enough to singe his ceramic armor but otherwise missing him completely. The last pair of shots from the pistols brought down the Elite's shields, causing it to roar in anger and pain as the slides of Akashi's pistols locked back._

Casting the pistols aside, the gunnery sergeant rolled forward as a globe of overcharged plasma roared over his form, then came up with a fallen plasma grenade in his hand. He kicked up out of the roll, demonstrating his strong athletic ancestry, and landed on the shoulders of the Elite, holding its energy sword arm away with one hand as he activated the grenade and slammed it into the Elite's helmet.

Kicking off of the armored alien, Akashi flew backwards through the air, catching a submachine gun that had been thrown into the air by the blast of another grenade, and unloading the weapon into the Elite. As soon as he hit the ground, Akashi rolled backwards into a landing strut, watching the grenade explode in an overwash of plasma and blinding light, the Elite vanishing inside it with a mangled scream.

The landing strut suddenly shifted against Akashi's back, and he looked back to find that he was actually leaning against a red-armored Elite whose plasma rifle was reared up high over its head. In slow motion, Chao watched the rifle descend, slam down on the point where his neck met his shoulder, heard the sharp crunch of his spine and shoulder fracturing, if not outright shattering.

Like a puppet with its strings suddenly cut, Akashi slumped to the deck, his hands twitching slightly, fingers attempting to clench and unclench on a weapon that wasn't there.

Unbidden, tears began to rise to Chao's eyes. Fate was a cruel thing indeed. It had conspired for the descendants of these girls to form the squad whose task it was to remove her from the _Athens_ before the Covenant invaded the Super-MAC station, and it, according to that mysterious voice, had conspired for her to be brought here, to this time, to be put into classes with those men's ancestors.

In the back of the room, a girl with long blonde hair, everything about her screaming noble lineage, stood up and bowed regally to Chao. "Student number twenty-nine and class representative, Yukihiro Ayaka."

Chao flinched as the visions came again, this time superimposing themselves over her vision as though they were a HUD display.

His face filled with panic, Private Yukihiro was running toward Chao, his battle rifle clutched to his chest, hordes of Covenant swarming into the room. Behind him, there was a clash of energy as a blue energy sword suddenly flashed into existence in midair, revealing the presence of a stealthed Elite.

Before Chao could shout a warning, the still-camouflaged Elite lunged, driving the superheated blade through Yukihiro's chest as though he were a paper dummy. Pain etched itself across his features, and he tried to scream, but only managed to gasp as the heat of the energy sword began to incinerate his lungs.

Chao's vision swam, and she bit her lip to prevent herself from sobbing aloud. Takahata noticed this, and quietly whispered to her, "Chao-san, are you okay?"

She nodded mutely as another girl stood, but she could only recognize through her tears a small figure and a mop of dark blue, possibly purple, hair. "N-number twenty-seven, Miyazaki Nodoka," the girl stuttered in a quiet, shy voice.

So this was her. This girl was the one whose image was on the pactio card that Captain Miyazaki would occasionally show her. This girl was meant to be one of the partners of her own ancestor, Negi Springfield. Even through six hundred years, the ONI captain had inherited his ancestor's quiet nature.

She found herself staring at Captain Miyazaki's back, watching the man empty his silenced submachine gun into the advancing special operations Elite, each bullet causing the alien's shields to flare, causing the active camouflage to work overtime to compensate for the compromise in the stealth field. As the last bullet spit from Miyazaki's SMG, the active camouflage failed, revealing an Elite in the black armor associated with the enemy special forces, golden energy arcing over its plates in a visual indication of its failed shields.

Miyazaki's weapon was empty, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to reload or switch weapons before the Elite reached him, and he was woefully out of range to attempt to physically beat it into submission. And so, the ONI captain glanced back at Chao, gave her an apologetic, warm smile, and then moved to place his body directly between her and the Elite.

"NO!" Chao screamed aloud, her outburst causing several of the students to recoil in surprise, and begin whispering amongst themselves.

Even Takahata was taken aback by this. "Uhh, Chao-san? Are you-"

She fled. As though she could just leave those horrible images of the past behind her, Chao broke and ran from the room, blindly following corridors and stairs, just trying to get as far away as she could. But no matter how far she ran, how tightly she closed her eyes, the images persisted.

_The twin prongs of the energy sword erupted from Miyazaki's back and the man slumped forward, dying, but not there yet. Chao looked on in horror, and in her field of vision, she saw the bodies of Saotome, descendant of the mischievous-looking girl in her class, slumped against the locker with energy sword burns through his body; of Asakura, or what was left of him, surrounded by needles that had not exploded and human ichor, of Kugimia, his ancestor that quiet girl who had an unusually deep voice for her age and gender, sprawled with the blue burns of a plasma grenade covering half his body; Ayase, who had nothing in common with the blankly-staring juice-drinker of 1A, his back split open by an energy sword; Narutaki, whose ancestor could be either of the twin girls who looked way too young to be in 1A, put down like an animal before he could even fight back; Akashi, a friend and big brother to the child genius, who was finally, mercifully still; Hasegawa, whose ancestor looked every inch the

technical genius he had been, of whom she knew nothing of his fate save the blood-splattered canopy of the Pelican._

When Chao finally stopped running, she found herself on the roof of the academy, staring out at the massive Yggdrasil Tree in the center of the campus, tears still streaming down her face. Once more, in sequence, she saw the bodies of her squad in their final positions, and her mind began to clear, and focus on a thought, a plan.

"It was magic that let Akira at least take his killer with him," she said harshly through clenched teeth. "Magic is the only way to save humanity from the Covenant. If revealing magic will cause a civil war, then I will reveal magic _now_ so that the war will be over and done with when the Covenant rear their ugly heads, and we'll be able to fight them with better technology _and_ magic."

The Chinese genius smiled a smile befitting a mad scientist. "Asakura, Akashi, Saotome, Yukihiro, Hasegawa, Ayase, Kugimia, Miyazaki, I swear, that I will find a way to force the world to recognize magic, that we'll be able to stop the Covenant this time, that you won't all have to die in vain."

She stood upright, and wiped the last of her tears away. "Barring that, I'll design weapons, vehicles, battle robots, anything that will give us an edge. But revealing magic is the key." She stared out at the Yggdrasil Tree and spread her arms out wide, grinning madly. "_This_ is why Fate brought me so far back in time. _This_ is my destiny. History will remember me as a murderer, but _I_ will know that my actions will save human beings from extinction."

3. Better Men

_Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
>_We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
>_And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags,
>_He wars on Death, for lives: not men, for flags.
>- The Next War

_December 25, 2012
>_Middle School Student Dorms, Ruins of Mahora Academy, Eastern Japan
>_0245 hours, local time_

Silence filled the desolate, broken corridors of the once-lively student dorms of the Mahora Academy for Girls. A chill wind pervaded the corridor, accompanied by gently drifting snow and the wan illumination provided by the stars overhead. It had been three years since nuclear devastation had claimed the city, and yet even still, the vast stores of magical energy that infused the very ground, irradiated or not, made it a prize worth fighting for.

Snow and probably some debris crunched underfoot as Chao moved slowly through the darkened halls, her MA5C assault rifle cradled tightly to her chest. Two of the upgraded Chacha battle droid units equipped with active camouflage accompanied her, invisible to the naked eye and most sensors, but she could still hear them moving through the snow, and left herself a mental note to design and install sound dampeners.

Faint light emanated from beneath a doorway on her left. She approached the door and knocked on its reinforced metal surface in a specific pattern. After a moment, a panel slid open in the door and a handprint scanning device, salvaged from the University Engineering Division, was thrust out at her. Slipping the assault rifle into its cradle on the back of her armor, Chao removed her thick glove and placed her hand on the scanner, then spoke clearly and audibly, "Lingshen Chao, Number 19. I am a monument to all your sins."

A metallic voice from the scanner responded, _"Voice and DNA identification confirmed."_

The scanner retreated, and then she heard the sound of the multitude of heavy latches and magical seals being removed, before the door swung open and she found herself face to face with the business end of an antique magic caster. Normally such a weapon would not be a cause for alarm for one so well-shielded as Chao was, but this particular caster, the blue-tinted Nero, when wielded with its red-colored twin Dante, by the gunslinging girl currently wielding it, presented trouble even to her.

"You alone?" Yuuna Akashi asked, her brown eyes flicking across the ruined hallway.

Chao glanced back and nodded, and the two droids disengaged their active camouflage. "Only these two."

Yuuna nodded and lowered her casters, slipping them into the customized holsters at the small of her back. She backed away from the door to allow Chao and her droids entry, then shut the door after them and began the laborious process of resetting all the mundane and magical locks. Chao remained silent during all this, refraining from disturbing the incantations Yuuna was casting to seal the locks.

Once finished, Yuuna turned away from the door and moved through the foyer, turning a corner to enter the living room. "So," she said back to Chao, "it seems that this truce has taken. I haven't heard any fighting in hours."

The Chinese girl nodded. "I actually went all the way over to the International High School. Traded a pork bun for a bottle of vodka with one of the Russian sentries."

Yuuna smiled. "Ever devious, eh, Chao-lin? Cheating those Russians out of a good bottle of booze."

She shrugged. "Probably crap brand anyway."

The living room was fully-occupied by a number of former students of Negi Springfield. Madoka Kugimia was stationed at the room's only window, wearing matte black clothing and sporting a MolMolian-issue SRS99D-S2 sniper rifle, built to the exact specifications of the UNSC design Chao had provided to the island nation. The weapon rested across the short-haired girl's lap, but she kept watch over the street and buildings outside with the steady, detail-attentive eye of a practiced and professional sniper. Hard to imagine that she was a cheerleader five years ago.

To Chao's left, just around the corner she had entered, Yue Ayase and

Nodoka Miyazaki slept soundly on a tattered couch, the two friends and former librarians occupying either end of the off-green piece of furniture. The battle armor they wore, built of the same bullet- and energy-resistant ferroceraamic material that comprised the combat suits of UNSC orbital drop shock troopers (ODSTs), regulated its user's external temperature remarkably well, but the young women were still curled up beneath thin blankets.

Just past them, tucked into a corner of the room, was Chisame Hasegawa. Her legs were pulled up close to her, her chin resting on her knees, and her laptop was situated on the floor in front of her. Her trusted combat shotgun leaned against her right shoulder, its battered stock a testament to more kills coming as a result of beatdowns than buckshot. The girl had grown very close to one of the missing Kuro Heroes, one Hiroyuki Murakami, and his disappearance over the past four years kept her on a constant edge, ready to lash out at just about anything.

Chao noticed that a webcam was perched on top of the laptop, but she somehow doubted that the girl was updating the web page of her Net idol alter-ego, Chiu.

A fireplace broke the wall to the left of Chisame, and against the other side of the fireplace leaned Haruna Saotome. The former manga-ka and rumor monger slept lightly against the cracked bricks, her Imperium Graphics artifact set close to her side. She was one of the not-insignificant number of former students who preferred to refrain from the use of firearms in battle, Nodoka and Yue along with her. Others, like Yuuna, were somewhere in between, as her weapons were both magic and firearms at the same time.

The center of the room was occupied by a warped coffee table, one of its legs supported temporarily by Nodoka's Diarium Ejus artifact. Surrounding the table were Ayaka Yukihiro, Kazumi Asakura, and the Narutaki twins, Fuka and Fumika. Ayaka and Kazumi were busy studying a satellite map of the Mahora area, while the twins were voraciously consuming cup ramen. Chao also sensed the presence of Kazumi's ghostly friend, Sayo Aisaka, though she could not see the spirit herself.

With a start, Chao realized that every girl in this room was the ancestor of one of the members of the Marine squad that she had worked so closely with during the Covenant War, the very same Marine squad that had given their lives to remove her from the besieged Super-MAC platform Athens. To Chao, their lives had been given needlessly; she had been forced to resort to her *Casseiopeia* in order to escape death at the hands of the Covenant boarding party.

The young genius took another look around the room's occupants. Madoka seemed to notice Chao's attention and glanced in her direction, then returned to keeping watch over the street. Yue murmured something incoherent and shifted slightly. Nodoka drew herself into a tight ball and clutched the blanket closer to her; the girl's ability to read surface thoughts had surpassed the need for her artifact, causing Chao to wonder if Nodoka was subconsciously viewing Chao's memories in her dreams. Chisame's attention remained focused on her laptop, the steady pattering of the keypad not losing stride once; Chao wondered what could so occupy the technical wizard's attention. Haruna shook awake suddenly, her hands blindly clutching at her chest. Chao flinched; the girl's descendant had

reacted in the exact same manner when he had been impaled by the plasma sword. Kazumi busied herself by directing the six remote spy cameras that were her pactio artifact, their images transmitted to a small LCD display that Ayaka used to mark the position of enemy forces on the satellite map. Fuka and Fumika continued to eat their ramen as though they hadn't a care in the world, and Yuuna paced back and forth, out of sight of Madoka's window, her hip-skirt artifact swishing with her movements.

The chesty gunslinger noticed Chao's expression, and paused. "Something the matter, Chao-lin?"

Chao blinked twice, then shook her head. For half a second there, she thought she had heard the voice of Yuuna's descendant overlapping the girl's own voice. "I... not really, no... Just... thinking about the future..."

Haruna and the twins turned their attention fully to Chao at this. Madoka spared the Chinese girl a glance. Chisame, Kazumi, and Ayaka paid her no mind. "Oh, ho?" Haruna said, grinning deviously. "Do we remind you of a certain aspect of your future?"

"Yes, actually," Chao answered. Feeling tears rising again, she quickly turned her back on the room. "I knew all of your descendants. Each and every girl in this room. Amazingly enough, they all still carried your family names."

"Wow, that's cool!" Fuka exclaimed.

"What's my descendant like?" Fumika asked.

"Is mine a badass gunslinger?" Yuuna asked with a grin.

Haruna, surprisingly enough, noticed the verb tense Chao used, and caught the undertone of her words. "You said you 'knew' our descendants. As in, knew them in the past, but no longer."

Slowly, Chao nodded once. "They...all died. In order to save my life. To take me to safety. We were caught by surprise... Never had a chance."

"And that's why you came back to this era to reveal magic to the world," Nodoka said, sitting up on the couch. "You saw how my descendant at least managed to take one enemy with him by using magic, and decided that our race was doomed without magic."

"Hey, way to go, _Honya-chan_," Haruna said, giving the dark-haired girl a thumbs-up. "That was a memory you just read, not a surface thought."

Nodoka shrugged. "It was a current running near the surface, easy enough to read."

"It puts it in a different perspective, knowing now Chao-san's motives the way we do," Yue murmured, remaining prone on the couch. "If it was known to us that Chao-san was doing what she did in order to improve mankind's chances of surviving that war in the future, most of us would have gone along with her."

Chao smiled. "But it was better that you opposed me," she answered.

"Witnessing all of you fighting so hard for what most of you perceived as merely a game, that unbreakable spirit displayed by all of Mahora's Mage Knights, it reminded me of the one overwhelming advantage that humanity has, that can't be matched by technology or magical prowess. Our indomitable determination to survive." She turned around to once more face the group, no longer caring to conceal the tears that streamed down her face. "As a species, we human beings possess a will to survive that surpasses the instinct found in any other species. It was everyone's battle that reminded me of this, that gave me the hope that perhaps there is a chance for us to return from that brink."

Yuuna moved across the room, laying a hand on the Chinese girl's shoulder. "Chao-lin..."

She shook her head and brushed away her tears. "It was the good memories I had of your descendants that kept me focused on completing my mission," she said. "Not even really so much a desire to save humanity, even though I tacked that on as a noble vestige. I could only think, that maybe if I could change history, that they wouldn't have to die. Or, at the very least, their deaths wouldn't have had to be in vain. I probably would've given up, if I didn't have my memories of them."

Getting up off the couch, Nodoka walked over to Chao and put her hands on the shorter girl's shoulders. "Your memories of your friends, unique and wonderful moments that you have become the keeper of... You have said that your humanity was lost to you, that you were a demon who sold her soul to science." The librarian-mage smiled kindly at her. "Your memories, and fighting for friends who you valued so much, kept your humanity alive and focused. I can only hope that we, as well, have given you many memories to cherish."

Kazumi grinned. "Speaking of memories, if you don't mind, I just got an idea for another one for you, one you can actually carry around and look at." She produced her digital camera and waved it enticingly. "Since all of us here are the ancestors of your group from the future, you could take a picture with all of us. I don't know if you had a picture of your friends, but if you didn't, you'll have this one...now..." The journalist's speech slowed to a halt and she looked down, as though contemplating the potential negative ways in which Chao could take her words. When next she spoke, her voice was subdued, "I...I mean uh, if that's not, you know, disrespectful of them, to you..."

"I think it's an excellent idea," Chao answered, giving the reporter a smile to let her know that she did not take offense from her suggestion. "But only if everyone else doesn't mind."

One by one, every girl voiced or showed their agreement with the idea, even Chisame, whose affirmation was a simple thumbs up. At that, Kazumi and Ayaka moved the decrepit table off into the corner that Haruna had occupied previously, clearing a space in the center of the room big enough for all of them. Madoka stood up from her chair, closed the window she had been observing the ruined campus from, and placed a talisman on the window to make it appear from the outside to be nothing more than an empty, ruined room beyond the window.

Taking the Chinese time-jumper by the shoulders, Kazumi moved her to

stand in the middle of the room. "Okay, Chao-san, you stand right here in the middle. Everybody else, um..." She looked around at the other girls, having intended to propose a sort of order or arrangement, then realized that she had no ideas. "Uhh, just stand anywhere, I guess."

"Alrighty!" Fuka and Fumika exclaimed simultaneously, moving to stand directly in front of Chao. "We'll camp right here!" Fuka said.

Picking up her sniper rifle, Madoka knelt down to the left of the twins, leaning the rifle up against her left shoulder. Ayaka knelt down on the other side of the twins. Haruna, with her artifact in arms, stood to Chao's right, and Nodoka and Yue moved over to the left of Chao, with Yue standing closer to Chao. Yuuna and Chisame stood behind and to either side of Chao, making sure they were standing between Chao and Haruna, and Chao and Yue, respectively.

"Kazumi, give your camera to one of Chao-rin's droids," Haruna said. "You gotta be in here too!"

"Sure thing," Kazumi replied, handing off the camera to the short-haired replica of Chachamaru that obligingly stepped forward, then turned and spoke to the empty air to her right, "Sorry, Sayo-chan, but you'll have to stay out of this one." She paused, then smiled, reached up her right hand, and patted the presumed location of the ghost's head. "I'm sure she'll let you in on the next one, right Chao-san?"

Chao smiled in the ghostly girl's direction. "Of course."

With that, Kazumi took her place to Haruna's right. As the droid moved to center the group in the camera's viewfinder, Chao looked around at the placement of the girls around her. "Just a moment," she said. "Yuuna-san, would you and Haruna-san switch places? Nodoka-san, you and Yue-san as well."

As she switched places with the former basketball star, Haruna asked, "Any particular reason for this sudden change-up?"

"Though your descendants and I had been together for many months in the war, I had known Captain Miyazaki and Sergeant Akashi before, and always looked up to them," Chao explained. "They were like big brothers to me."

Yuuna grinned, reached behind her back to draw Nero with her left hand, then looped that arm around Chao's neck. "That makes me proud to know, in a weird sort of way, to be thinking that far ahead, you know."

On Chao's other side, Nodoka gave their former foe a smile, then picked up her artifact and reverted it to its card form, holding up it between the index and middle fingers of her left hand. "Even though, I'm pretty sure that the pactio card my descendant had was just a paper copy, since all the research Yue and I have done seems to indicate that pactio cards will disappear entirely upon the deaths of both the magister magi and the ministra."

"The magical bloodline in your family is very strong, Nodoka-san,"

Chao said. "In my day and age, the latent magical energy of the world has been heavily, shall we say, watered-down. Even still, Captain Miyazaki was a practicing mage."

"Okay guys, chit-chat later!" Kazumi said. "Better get your final poses out now!"

Most of the girls were already in their desired poses, but Yuuna added to hers by closing her left eye, grinning, and holding up her right hand in the 'V for victory' sign. The Chachamaru-replica battle droid, seeing that the girls were holding still, centered the group in the digital camera's viewfinder and pressed the shutter release. After observing the image captured for a moment, the droid blinked, the closest it was going to get to expressing displeasure.

"Master, I believe something is wrong with this device," the droid said. "There appear to be more people in this image than there should be."

"Let me have a look," Chao answered, moving out of the crowd of girls and taking the camera. Almost as soon as her mind registered what she was looking out, she let out a surprised shriek and dropped the camera.

The falling device halted just inches above the floor, and at first the girls assumed that one of them had used a wind-based spell to arrest its descent, but then Kazumi stepped forward and said, "Nice save, Sayo-chan," as she plucked it from midair. "Now, let's see what got Chao so...whoa."

"What is it, Kazumi-san?" Fumika asked, first of the girls to crowd around Kazumi to see the picture on the display. Confusion wrote itself across her young features as she saw that for each girl in the picture, there was an adult male near them wearing the armor that Chao had described as belonging to the UNSC Marines in her time. "Hey, who're all those people?"

Murmurs of echoed confusion and curiosity passed among the group for a moment, until Chao regained the sense of self and being to answer, "They're your descendants. Spirits, I guess. But how? They don't even exist yet."

"Ah, but they've always existed," a male voice spoke from all around them.

All the girls immediately went for their armaments and formed a defensive circle in less than a second, scanning their surroundings for any sign of the voice's owner. A dark form appeared on the couch that Yue and Nodoka had been sleeping on, slowly resolving itself into the form of a white-haired man with pale skin and blue eyes seated cross-legged on the couch, wearing a white, high-collar shirt reminiscent of British naval officers from the days of pirates and galleons, and matching pants. Methodically, each girl bearing a weapon brought it to bear on the man.

If he was at all put off by the prospect of such firepower pointed at him, he did not show it. He merely smiled, and raised a hand toward them. "You may lower your weapons, dear ladies," he said. "I am no adversary of yours; in fact, you and yours would consider me an ally."

"Who are you?" Yuuna asked, not lowering her casters.

"I have many names, most of which cannot be pronounced by human vocal systems. Those of you who would know of me..." He looked pointedly at Yue. "...would know me by the name of Julias Vandole."

There was a moment's delay, then the braided Baka Ranger rocked back as though struck. "Julias Vandole, of the Three Guardians, the Guardian of the Cycle of Rebirth."

The man known as Julias smiled at Yue, his teeth a perfect white board. "As expected of you, Ayase-san." He looked toward Yuuna. "I trust then, that the knowledge of my self and my role, and your own knowledge of my fellow guardian, the Yochi no Kouken, Otohime Mutsumi-san, would give you a reason to point your weapons elsewhere. I assure you, young gunner, that you could not even hope to overcome my defense against magic."

Slowly, Yuuna nodded, then reholstered her magic casters.

"Now, as I was explaining," Julias continued, turning his attention back to Chao. "In the cycles of death and rebirth, souls are eternal. They were, are, and ever will be the same. The only difference is what form they take in their next life. The reason that the souls of your comrades appear to you now, in the form they have not yet taken, is simple. I am sure, as you are aware, that spirits are naturally drawn to high concentrations of magic. Such is the case with your little friend here, Aisaka-san." The man muttered a brief incantation, gestured with a finger, and suddenly, Sayo was visible to all in the room. The startled spirit immediately moved behind Kazumi. "Do not be so frightened, my dear. You need not fear my coming to harvest you for your next life at any point in the immediate future. You still have a purpose to fulfill here in your current form."

"Such, then, was the case with your comrades, Chao Lingshen, when you activated your Cassiopeia. The souls of your comrades were drawn to the magic of the device, and were caught in the time loop you created when you jumped back in time, and henceforth bound to you. In fact, part of the reason I am here is to rectify this situation, by harvesting them and returning them to the time they came from."

Chao held her hand against her chest. "So...they've been with me all this time?"

Julias nodded. "A part of you, and yet still, apart from you. So, all I need to do is collect them, return them to the time they belong in, and I shall be on my way."

"What do I need to do?" Chao asked.

"Nothing." Julias smiled. "In fact, I'm already done. You need not worry about losing them forever. After all, you have your memories of them. And besides, souls that are close to each other are often drawn to each other. Should you return to your own time, I have no doubt that you would meet them in their next lives. Well, my task here is completed." He touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his brow. "Ladies, I am sure I will meet some of you again."

And with that, he faded out, in the same manner that he had entered.

"...Well, that was strange," Kazumi said, following a long silence on behalf of the girls. She looked down at the camera in her hand, still with the images of their descendants added to their own, as though they were a natural part of it. "So, what about this?"

"I'd like to keep it," Chao answered.

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_March 3, 2553

>_Memorial Hill, Outskirts of Voi, Africa

>_1836 hours, local time_

The hill had been a battlefield less than a week earlier. An anti-aircraft battery had been stationed on this hill by the Covenant Loyalists in order to prevent the UNSC from staging an aerial attack on the elements of the Prophet of Truth's fleet over the excavation site that created the portal leading to the Ark. That artillery battery had been destroyed by Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, the Sangheili Arbiter, and a force of UNSC Marines and hastily-armed Voi factory workers.

In the aftermath of the Human-Covenant War, as it was coming to be called, it had been decided that the hill would become the first of many memorials to honor the valor and sacrifice of the men and women of the United Nations Space Command. To that end, recovery crews had painstakingly recovered the wreckage of a _Longsword_-class starfighter-bomber, the last craft to be shot down by the anti-aircraft battery before Master Chief and his assault force had destroyed it. The tail fin of the bomber remained remarkably intact, and so it became the centerpiece of the memorial. Cemented into the ground, work crews had etched into its metal surface the insignia of the UNSC, as well as an inscription that read,

IN MEMORY OF THOSE FALLEN

IN THE DEFENSE OF EARTH

AND HER COLONIES

MARCH 3, 2553

Throughout the day, soldiers, sailors, and civilians had been to the memorial, leaving behind pictures of their fallen comrades, flowers, and other symbols. Three BR55 battle rifles had been propped up in a triangle in front of the wall, a soft-cover Marine hat placed over their barrels. Two MA5Cs leaned against the wall, ODST helmets placed over the butt stocks, and a dog tag hanging from each weapon's trigger guard.

Chao, now 24 years old, stood to the side and watched a pair of Marines and a purple-armored Sangheili leave a photograph of a Marine comrade on the wall, the Marines saluting proudly as the alien stood in solemn respect. The decision to include the new allies of the UNSC in the memorial ceremony had come down from the public relations division of high command, something about it showing the unity the two recently-allied races displayed in honoring the dead.

Tugging at the sleeves of her service dress blue Office of Naval Intelligence uniform, Chao watched as the honor guard formed up, consisting of four orange-armored and outrageously-headgeared Sangheili honor guards on the left, when facing the memorial, and the matching number of UNSC personnel on the right, one each from all four major branches of the UNSC: Army, Navy, Marines, and Aerospace Force. The Sangheili bore disengaged plasma swords and their curious ceremonial lances, while their human counterparts carried an M6C service pistol and an M1 Garand semiautomatic rifle. Though archaic even during her stay at Mahora Academy, the M1, for some reason, was viewed as the penultimate honor guard rifle.

Standing atop the platform in front of the memorial walkway, Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood calmly presided over the gathering, sharing quiet words with those who left reminders on the wall, reminisces where he knew those whose images were left behind. Chao let her eyes linger across the metal wall. She knew some of the men and women in those photographs, such as Master Sergeant Avery Johnson, Commander Miranda Keyes, Corporal Perez, who was also one of the descendants that she had kept tabs on, descended from gunslingers Lorenzo Ruiz and Mana Tatsumiya.

Once the number of soldiers leaving mementos had slacked off, Chao approached the platform. As she passed between the honor guard, she could feel the eyes of the men and aliens upon her. It seemed her reputation preceded her. Her boots echoed mournfully from the metal grating of the steps leading up to the platform as she produced a copy of the photograph she had taken with ten of her friends and classmates, that their nine descendants had appeared in; she kept the original close to her heart at all times, a reminder to her of all her friends, both in her own time and in the past.

Lord Hood nodded solemnly to her as she stepped up onto the platform, found an open spot on the wall, and affixed the photograph to it. He took two steps to stand behind her, and looked at the photograph. "The ancestors of your men?" he asked.

Chao nodded, feeling her eyes beginning to sting, a sign of impending tears. "The history books do not do them credit," she said. "I only hope the historians will do their descendants credit. Brave men who gave their lives to protect me."

"Their sacrifice, to protect your life, so that you could assist the Ala Alba and Kuro Arashi to save the world."

She looked at the admiral incredulously, and he smiled. "I may be old, Lieutenant Lingshen, but even a senile old fool like me can see that not all of your research was dedicated to shipbuilding and weapons manufacturing. Besides, my ancestor once met you and the others, and thought it would be prudent to leave a private diary to be passed down until it reached the time period you came from." The admiral turned, looking up toward the sky, where the Sangheili cruiser Shadow of Intent hovered tirelessly over the Forerunner artifact that the Covenant Loyalists had dug up. "The world may not ever know how much affect your mission had on the outcome of this war. Even I have no way of knowing. This world of magic is as alien to me as they are. But, it's over now. This war, we've survived. I'd like to think that you and your comrades had a hand in laying the foundation for our survival, all those years ago." He turned back

toward her. "So, Chao Lingshen, what will you do now?"

She smiled and brushed her hand over the photograph. "Even though it was the Marines I had served with that caused me to go back in time, I no longer feel as if I have a purpose in this time. I feel...incomplete. In a few more years, the World Tree in Japan will reach the peak of its magic cycle again. I think I will return to the past, for good this time."

Lord Hood nodded, then offered her his hand. "Their gain, our loss," he said. "Whatever it is you choose to do, whenever it is you wish to stay, I wish you the greatest success."

Chao met his hand with her own, a strong grip and a single shake. She noted that he flexed his hand afterwards and glanced at it, as though he'd expected that shaking hands with a mage would have some sort of physical affect. She smiled again. "Thank you, Admiral."

Taking one last moment to trace her fingers over the photograph she had left, Chao turned and returned to the loose formation of UNSC personnel, Sangheili warriors, and Unggoy infantry that had gathered to witness the ceremony. Surrounded by the combat uniforms of Marines just returning from duty, the service uniforms of shipbound naval officers, and even the armored forms of the aliens who had until just recently been her enemies, Chao felt safe and protected, in a way she had not felt since she had left the past the most recent time.

Standing on top of the platform, Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood reached up and removed his uniform cover, bringing the head covering behind his head as he looked up at out, taking the time to meet eyes with every individual standing in the small gathering. "For us," he began, "the storm has passed. The War is over."

Chao closed her eyes as the admiral spoke, all the better to stem the rising tears she felt due to the memories invoked by the elder gentleman's tone and words.

"But let us never forget, those who journeyed into the howling dark, and did not return..."

_Future Perfect: The Story of Chao Lingshen, is dedicated in the honor and memory
>of all soldiers of every nation 'who journeyed into the howling dark' and never returned.
__- April the 27__th__, 2008_

End
file.